

ARTICLE APPEARED

ON PAGE 6, *Section*

22 June 1984

U.S. avoids charges of papal plot

By Terry Atlas

Chicago Tribune

WASHINGTON—Italian accusations of Bulgarian and Soviet involvement in the plot to murder Pope John Paul II in 1981 threaten to cut short what President Reagan calls his "quiet diplomacy" with the Soviets.

The Reagan administration has so far purposely avoided making the assassination attempt an issue in already strained East-West relations. A senior White House official said the administration was torn between its desire to condemn whoever was behind the plot and its concern about further provoking Kremlin "paranoia" toward Washington.

"It's a ticking time bomb for U.S.-Soviet relations," said an analyst of Soviet affairs with close government connections.

In recent days the White House has said that efforts to repair those relations were underway by means of "quiet diplomacy" over arms and raising the possibility of a summit meeting with Soviet leader Konstantin Chernenko.

THE ADMINISTRATION isn't going to say anything about the murder plot "until it is clear beyond any shadow of a doubt that a government is implicated," a State Department official said.

In the last 10 days, published accounts of the officially secret report by Italian Prosecutor Antonio Albano have said that Bulgaria's secret service, possibly with Soviet support, masterminded the assassination attempt in an effort to end the Pope's support for Solidarity, the independent Polish trade union that has since been outlawed but that threatened communist control of Poland in the early 1980s.

The 78-page report recommends that three Bulgarians and four Turks be tried in connection with the attack. The report, based on more than 25,000 pages of evidence gathered in a three-year investigation, describes in detail allegations of a well-organized conspiracy against the Pope by the Bulgarian secret service.

Among other things, the report says the weight of the evidence supports the claim by Mehmet Ali Agca, the convicted assailant of the pontiff, that he was promised more than \$400,000 by the Bulgarian secret service to kill John Paul II. Agca, 23, a Turkish terrorist, is serving a life sentence for wounding the Pope with a pistol in St. Peter's Square outside the Vatican on May 13, 1981.

ASKED ABOUT the possibility of a Soviet role in the attack, Albano told an interviewer Tuesday: "Do you think Bulgaria could do this thing without Moscow's agreement? Do you think Bulgaria's decision to boycott the Olympic Games was made by Bulgaria alone? I don't think so. But, of course, this is my personal opinion."

U.S. officials, speaking on condition that they not be identified, said they found it almost unbelievable that a government would order the murder of a pope. They caution that the evidence amassed by Italian investigators, based in part on assertions by Agca, is "murky ground at best."

And they add that they don't want to threaten the Italian investigation and eventual prosecution of others by "making this look like a Reagan administration effort to flog the Soviets."

There are reports that the CIA, for various reasons, has been skeptical of the idea of an official Bulgarian or Soviet link in the shooting. Ironically, Bulgaria denounced the prosecutor's report as having been inspired by the CIA.